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Coffé, Hilde

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# (Small) Entrepreneurs first!

## Analysis of the economic discourse of the Vlaams Belang\*

Hilde Coffé

Utrecht University

A large body of research on political parties is devoted to the family of extreme right parties. Yet, systematic analyses of extreme right parties' discourse remain scarce. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by providing a discourse analysis of the Vlaams Belang, one of the most successful extreme right-wing parties in Europe. Moreover, by focusing on this party's economic discourse, the study also sheds new light on the ongoing debate about the economic viewpoints of the new extreme right parties. We conclude that the Vlaams Belang's economic rhetoric is in line with its ethno-linguistic, nationalist standpoints and pleas for a Flemish economic policy. The party's economic programme is built on liberal points of view and seems particularly aimed at attracting (dissatisfied) liberal voters. Importantly, as economic issues remain subordinated to the party's ideological core, it appears that the Vlaams Belang has largely instrumentalised its programme to expand its electorate.

**Keywords:** discourse; extreme right parties; economic party manifesto; Flanders

### 1. Introduction

The lasting success of extreme right-wing parties in several Western European countries has made the extreme right-wing family of parties one of the most frequently discussed topic in political science. In spite of the wide range of research activities regarding extreme right-wing parties, their ideology and discourse has, however, been given relatively little attention (Mudde 2000).

This article represents a first step to fill this gap. We examine the use of language by the Vlaams Belang as one of the extreme right-wing parties having the greatest electoral success (Coffé 2008). In particular, we concentrate on its use of language regarding economics. This is important because the international scientific

literature contains contradictory ideas with respect to the economic points of view of extreme right-wing parties. Whereas Kitschelt (1995) uses the free market economy as a starting point for his 'winning formula', authors such as Mudde (1999 and 2007) and Rydgren (2002) state that extreme right-wing parties are rather nationalist and protectionist when it comes to economy. Our analysis assesses whether the Vlaams Belang meets Kitschelt's (1995) definition of the ideal-typical extreme right-wing party combining neo-liberal ideology with authoritarianism and ethnocentrism. We therefore analyse the texts published by the party on the occasion of its Economic Congress in November 2005, the context for the presentation of its economic programme.

The present article is structured as follows. In a first section, we briefly discuss the existing literature with regard to the economic discourse of extreme right-wing parties. The second, most extensive part of this article contains our analysis. We then first discuss our research materials and the method we have applied, to continue with the discussion of the party's economic discourse. The final paragraph summarizes our most important findings and suggests some directions for future research.

## **2. Economic views of extreme right-wing parties**

In his influential work *The Radical Right in Western Europe*, Kitschelt (1995) emphasizes market liberalism as a central characteristic of successful new extreme right-wing parties. He associates ideal-typical extreme right-wing parties with a combination of neo-liberalism, authoritarianism and ethnocentrism. According to Kitschelt, with a 'winning formula' of free market ideas combined with authoritarianism and xenophobia, extreme right-wing parties can occupy a certain niche of the electoral market and succeed in attracting a wide audience: the working class responds to the parties' authoritarian and ethnocentric ideas, whereas the free market ethics appeal to the self-employed.

However, Kitschelt's definition of successful extreme right-wing parties has been sharply criticized. A first point of criticism raised against his analysis is that the new extreme right-wing parties are less market-oriented than Kitschelt claims them to be. Mudde (1999), for example, states that they tend to have a 'welfare chauvinist' economic programme. The welfare state is presented as a system of social protection for those who are part of the ethically defined community. According to Mudde (1999), these extreme right parties' programmes reflect to their nationalism, and are consequently 'economically nationalist'. The economy is supposed to serve the nation and therefore national companies and workers should be protected against foreign competitors. Mughan et al. (2003) also state that extreme

right-wing parties adhere to economically nationalist points of view and even advocate protectionist measures, at least with regard to the international economy. Concerning the national economy, however, they are in favour of free market principles. Others have argued that the validity of Kitschelt's argument seems temporally bounded. Lubbers (2001), for example, notes that in programmes of extreme right-wing parties, market-oriented liberal points of view were abandoned during the nineties. In his opinion, their economic points of view were adjusted in favour of a policy of increased government regulation. Rydgren (2002), too, states that during the nineties most extreme right-wing parties adopted protectionist ideas and tended towards an economic position in the centre or even to a left-wing position. Finally, Betz (2002) concludes that the FPÖ, in providing an answer to a growing number of social questions, significantly moderated its neo-liberal economic programme. Interestingly, while McGann & Kitschelt (2005) state that the 'winning formula' still applies to the FPÖ and the SVP, they too acknowledge that neo-liberal thinking weakened among many extreme right-wing parties during the nineties. Still, they argue that the 'winning formula' does not need consistent neo-liberalism, but rather a compromise that sufficiently targets the free market to attract petit bourgeois voters but at the same time does not scare away the working classes with an attack on the welfare state. Moreover, it should promise protection to both groups. This point of view is much in line with Ignazi (1996), who also states that the combination of free market principles and protectionist measures is typical of extreme right-wing parties. Their political programmes are, according to Ignazi, a mix of social protection limited to the native population with private initiative.

A second point of criticism levelled at Kitschelt is that neo-liberalism is not a necessary ingredient of successful extreme right parties (a.o. Betz 1996; Schain 1997; Mudde 1999 and 2007). Mudde (1999) states that the economic theme is at best a secondary topic for extreme right-wing parties. According to Ignazi (2002), this is partially due to a lack of 'economic culture' among party leaders, a lack of the expectation of government participation, and a lack of credibility with regard to this theme, even among party members and voters. However, although the economic theme has not led to the breakthrough of extreme right-wing parties, some parties are increasingly emphasizing this theme and extending their electoral programme with it. Also, some leading members in the more successful parties started to recognise the relatively scant attention that was paid to socio-economic themes. Bruno Mégret, at that time still the number two of the FN, said in 1996: "Today, we are recognized as competent in the area of insecurity or immigration: tomorrow we must conquer a third important domain, the economic and social." (quoted in Mudde, 2007). The broadening of their programme is obviously also a tactical tool to attract a new group of voters. Similarly, Michels states in his work of 1962 that the radical left-wing parties, in

order to maintain their increasing power, broadened their programme so as to attract a wider electorate.

### 3. Analysis

Two important questions emerge from the discussion in the previous section. These relate to the two unresolved issues with respect to the economic stance of new extreme right parties. The first question is how important extreme right parties' economic programme is in relation to the rest of their ideological views. That is, to the extent that these parties develop an economic programme, is this treated at the same level as its authoritarian and ethnocentric agenda, or does it rather play (at best) second cello? The second question pertains to the specific content of extreme right-wing parties' economic programmes. In order to examine both these issues, we analyse the economic programme of the Vlaams Belang. Particularly, we perform a qualitative discourse analysis based on the texts written on the occasion of the Vlaams Belang's Economic Congress organised on the 26th November, 2005. While the next two subsections provide background information on the texts and our methodology, the results of our analysis are contained in the third subsection.

### 4. Research materials and methodology

As mentioned, the texts written on the occasion of the Vlaams Belang's Economic Congress represent the subject of our analysis. They entail two texts presented at the Introductory Colloquium on Economy (Startcolloquium, Saturday 18th June, 2005) and the final Economic Manifesto. The different texts focus on the external environment and can consequently be defined as 'front stage' documents. More particularly, the texts appeal to party representatives and members, but also to a wider audience. Although the number of readers of official party texts is small, there are still many so-called indirect readers who hear or read about the report in the media. The Introductory Colloquium and the Congress were indeed discussed in several media.

The first text presented at the Introductory Colloquium, a so-called 'Draft Manifesto' (Ontwerpmanifest), is a text with the specific objective of launching the discussion about the economic programme on the one hand, and engaging with several economic actors on the other. These two goals explain the presence of many rhetorical questions – often containing an accusation – in the text. One example is the following question, designed to legitimize the party's advocacy of minimum tax pressure:

*When taxes are too high and paperwork is obstructive, then how can free entrepreneurship exist? Is it still possible to hire the person one really wishes to hire? Is property still truly inspiring? (Draft Manifesto, 6)*

Although the text is meant to start a dialogue, rhetorical questions such as these prevent it from being truly dialogic. Moreover, it does not contain alternative proposals and doubts are nowhere to be found. This is in line with Fairclough's (1992) observation that modern-day policy statements are more promotional than analytical, more concerned about convincing people than starting a dialogue.

The second document presented at the Introductory Colloquium, the so-called 'Focus Text', analyses the results of a 'Tour of Flanders', organised by the Vlaams Belang to interrogate several actors about their points of view. These company visits and conversations 'in the field' inspired – according to Annemans (Interview, 17th January, 2006) – the programme and provided the party with important economic know-how. The programme was written during a process of consultation targeted at providing the party with 'a broad base' for its economic ideology. This populist rhetoric is typical for the Vlaams Belang, and new extreme right-wing parties in general. Indeed, they aim above all at the 'people's will', which they represent and respect. The Draft Manifesto, for example, opens with the statement that "*the Vlaams Belang is the political party listening to Flanders*" (Draft Manifesto, 1).

Information about the study that the Vlaams Belang organised during its 'Tour of Flanders', however, is not provided in the texts. Consequently, the reader lacks the necessary elements to form an opinion about the quality of the figures and their relevance to the party's arguments. Still, the party means to 'prove' its statements with these figures. The poll is also indicative of the populist fascination with simple survey results (because of their homogenizing effect) as the ultimate reflection of 'the voice of the people' (Papadopoulos 2002). Apart from its own research results, the party also enumerates various other studies in its Focus Text. This generates an impression of scientific rigour, which is difficult to contradict by the Vlaams Belang's opponents. So whereas the Draft Manifesto is full of rhetorical questions, the Focus Text is principally an enumeration of different research results, often completed with statements of (scientific) experts or journalists. In the Focus Text, the readers are asked no questions – they are merely being informed.

The Draft Manifesto and the Focus Text are characterised by an absence of specific proposals. Such proposals are elaborated upon in the final Economic Manifesto 'Enterprise in Flanders Prosperity for All' (Ondernemend Vlaanderen Welvaart voor Iedereen). The costs of these proposals have, however, not been calculated. Moreover, since the Vlaams Belang to date remains a permanent opposition party as a consequence of the cordon sanitaire, it can easily 'overpromise' and has the advantage over its opponents that it cannot be judged on its actions.

The Economic Manifesto was the result of the reflections of different study groups – open to all members – consisting of approximately twenty people, including party members and people from the business world it had met during its Tour of Flanders. The study groups – unanimously – drafted texts that were summarized into the final Economic Programme. Allowing ‘the people’ to be part of the programme’s elaboration, the party has once again used a populist approach, even though the party leaders clearly pulled the strings (Interview, 17th January, 2006). Yet, as such, the discourse of the party may claim popular support while at the same time preformulating the terms that help create the state of mind that gives rise to such support in the first place (van Dijk 1993).

The texts have been analysed qualitatively. The choice of a qualitative research approach is directly related to the flexibility and possibilities this approach offers and to the question contained in our analysis. The aim of our research is to understand how the Vlaams Belang constructs reality through language and argumentation and which (economic) order the party aspires to. The analysis means to point out how the world (i.e. economic events) is presented by the Vlaams Belang and which different contexts of interpretation – discourses (presenting and constructing social reality) – play a part. These discourses are placed in the light of the Flemish (and Belgian) political context and consequently linked to and compared with the discourses used by the other social and political actors. Indeed, since we consider discourse as a social and interactive practice (see also Fairclough 1992 & 2003; Duranti & Goodwin 1992; Fairclough & Wodak 1997; Blommaert 2005), the discourse of one party cannot be considered in isolation, but should be studied by taking into account the context in which it is created. That is, to understand and explain the political use of language, it has to be contextualised in the broadest possible way by placing it in light of other statements, the general balance of power in societies, events, etc. This idea to include the context into our analysis is also in line with our definition of discourse. We define discourse in terms of its content as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication (Schmidt 2004).

Although the use of rhetorical techniques is treated on a secondary level, making an inventory of discourses represents the core of our analysis.

## 5. Results

Let us now turn to the results of our discourse analysis, which investigates Kitschelt’s (1995) thesis that neo-liberal economics constitutes a defining element of new extreme right parties. Firstly, we explore whether the economic issue is indeed a central theme in the Vlaams Belang’s discourse, or rather remains of

secondary importance. The second section explores the argument that the party holds neo-liberal views on the economy.

### 5.1 The importance of the economic issue

The organisation of an economic congress by the Vlaams Belang may be seen as an attempt of the party to broaden its programme. During an interview with the author (17th January, 2006), Gerolf Annemans, President of the Vlaams Belang's Research Service and organiser of the Economic Congress, confirmed that the Economic Manifesto had to fill a gap in the party's programme. He was of the opinion that the party had previously not given sufficient attention to economic issues and had limited itself to advocating a more central role for Flanders. Still, with the Economic Manifesto, he argues that the Vlaams Belang has conceived a better-founded vision of economy and employment. Moreover, according to Annemans, the organisation of the Congress and of previous activities such as the 'Tour of Flanders' (Ronde door Vlaanderen), have led to the disappearance of their 'cold feet' concerning the economic theme. In line with Ignazi's (2002) conclusions, according to Annemans, there was no 'economic culture' within the party before the organisation of the Economic Congress. Mudde (2000) also states that the socio-economic policy of the Vlaams Belang originally reflected the interests of only a few office holders. By extending its programme with economic standpoints, the party is aiming to enlarge its electorate and attract particularly liberal voters. In an interview, the party president Frank Vanhecke told the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* (15th June, 2005) that "[...] the VLD (the Flemish liberal party) has disappointed quite a few people among self-employed and entrepreneurs. Those people are now turning to us. They are also asking for a well-founded socio-economic programme." In his concluding speech, the party leader even compared the party's programme with the ideas Verhofstadt proposed before he became Prime Minister: "*The analysis of measures that are needed to ensure the Flemish' prosperity which we present today, is remarkably similar to the analysis that the former leader of the opposition, Guy Verhofstadt, made six years ago, in 1999 before the formation of his first purple coalition.*" Clearly, Vanhecke counted on triggering some associations with Verhofstadt who was very successful in 1999 with a liberal economic programme.

Yet, despite the party's focus on the economic issue by organising an Economic Congress, party representatives made it clear several times that the economic theme remains secondary. Gerolf Annemans, for example, stated at a press meeting organised during the Congress: "*The principles of our economic programme have been laid down and we can now start working on something far more important: local elections.*" In his closing speech, party president Frank Vanhecke



therefore quickly moved on from economic recipes to his ‘own’ familiar themes, particularly immigration policy. Anke Vandermeersch’s final speech, too, contained a link from the economic theme to the presence of non-European foreigners. She argued that *“the foreigners in our country are not exactly an economic value-added but rather a serious economic burden”* and that *“immigration is the cause of tax rise and in the long run also has a financial impact on our public sector”*. Hence, we may conclude that – contrary to Kitschelt’s (1995) assumption – the economic issue remains a secondary issue to the Vlaams Belang.

## 5.2 The economic ideology

The analysis regarding our second research question, namely whether or not the Vlaams Belang has a neo-liberal ideology, is structured according to three key concepts that are typical of the party’s attitude and discourse on the occasion of the Economic Congress. The choice of themes is therefore based on the ample attention these themes are given in the party documents we have examined and originates from a constant dialogue with the underlying data. More specifically, the themes pertain to the party’s advocacy of a Flemish economic policy, a performing government and an enterprise-friendly Flanders.

Explicit references to the texts are printed in italics and represent illustrations of the discourse patterns used by the Vlaams Belang on the occasion of its Economic Congress.<sup>1</sup> They are supplemented with quotes by other political and social actors to place the discourse of the Vlaams Belang in its societal context.

## 5.3 A Flemish economic policy

The economic texts of the Vlaams Belang are characterised by their Flemish/Walloon, ethno-linguistic orientation. The party’s discourse regarding an optimum economic policy is thus founded on its ethno-linguistic point of view and its aspiration to Flemish independence. Gerolf Annemans expresses the party’s appeal for a Flemish economic policy as follows:

*Our USP (Unique Selling Proposition) concerning economics and prosperity consists of three things: Flanders, Flanders, and once again Flanders. (Manifesto, 3)*

Proof for its ethno-linguistic rhetoric can also be found in the following quote, wrapped up in the rhetorical context of an argument containing different aspects: the ground, the warrant, the claim and the backing of the claim (Van Eemeren et al. 1997).

*[Ground] Economic depression in Wallonia?*

*[Warrant] Flanders and Wallonia are so different economically that a common policy is harmful to both regions.*

*[Backing] In Wallonia, a priority should for instance be the huge unemployment figures whereas Flanders – due to the openness of its economy – should especially pay attention to its competitive powers.*

*[Claim] It is high time that Flanders emphasizes certain elements as it sees fit, targeting its own specific situation. (Focus Text, 4)*

The problem is that Flanders and Wallonia are very different when it comes to their respective economies, and the solution the party proposes aims at an entirely independent economic policy for each region. Interestingly, however, this discourse about the different economic situation in Flanders and Wallonia and the related plea for the federalisation of (parts of) the economic policy can also be found among traditional Flemish parties. During their May 2005 Party Congress, the Flemish liberals insisted on a transfer of powers such as price policy, labour market policy and tax policy from the federal to the Flemish government during the next round of reform of the Belgian state. In its presentation of a socio-economic alternative (October 2005), CD&V (the Flemish Christian-Democrats) stated that regional entities should have control over economic instruments. CD&V would like Flanders to pursue its own policy concerning income, employment, research and development and corporate taxation. When he was Vice Prime Minister, Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A, the Flemish Socialist Party) made it clear that the French-speaking people would be wise to accept a far-reaching regionalisation of socio-economic policy.

Outside the political world, many actors stress the different economic situation in Flanders and Wallonia and the need for regionalisation of economic policy. In 2005, a group of Flemish business leaders published a manifesto (Warande Manifest) in favour of separation of the Belgian state structure. They argued that the current Belgian government structure is an obstruction to the development of secure prosperity.

Interestingly, while many Walloon policy-makers also agree that the Flemish and Walloon economies are different, they generally do not agree with the solution – i.e., the regionalisation of economic policy – advanced by the Vlaams Belang. In fact, they tend to emphasize the importance of solidarity. Elio Di Rupo, the President of Wallonia's Socialist Party (PS), for example, speaks of a win-win situation (during the Flemish Radio 1 programme *Actueel* on 24th February, 2005) that might result in cooperation between Dutch and French speakers: *"Because Flanders takes advantage from an economically strong Wallonia."*

In the Focus Text, the party's statement regarding the different economic situation in both regions refers to various 'experts'. Accordingly, in an attempt to

legitimise its own views, the Vlaams Belang cleverly uses the myth of ‘independent, objective’ science. To avoid accusations of ‘partiality’, the party also includes findings of Walloon professors or statements of Walloon politicians. This way, it counters possible criticism about being ‘prejudiced’ against the Walloons.

*In March 2005, MR (Wallonia’s liberal party) senator Alain Destexhe published a devastating analysis of the Walloon economy. [...] Destexhe concludes that the Walloon government’s Contract for the Future ought to be done away with and replaced by a new pact containing far-reaching measures, targeted at structural growth of employment. (Focus Text, 1)*

Such a reference to a Walloon senator criticising Walloon policy is a means for the party to show it agrees with this politician. Implicitly, this is a reprimand of other Walloon policy makers. These – and in particular the PS – are deemed responsible for Wallonia’s economic depression.

*The primary culprits of this debacle are the Walloon socialists. Whereas everywhere in Europe socialist parties have reformed to modern parties, the PS clings to a completely outdated political and economic culture. Wallonia remains a PS state that is entirely government-oriented. Foreign examples – just think of Labour under Blair or Schröder’s SPD – prove that a different solution is possible. (Focus Text, 2)*

This paragraph invites the reader to associate Wallonia with the PS – *L’état PS* is mentioned accordingly – and with a ‘rigid’ PS in particular. Consequently, this is a stereotyped statement. Wallonia is mentioned, but only one aspect is described, and in a very negative way. That antiquated image of the PS is then contrasted with the ‘modern’ social democratic parties of Blair and Schröder that have been trendsetters in using a ‘Third Way’ discourse.

Presenting Wallonia as a PS state with an interventionist reflex has, however, not exclusively been a Vlaams Belang initiative. Several Flemish politicians and commentators have the same idea of a rigid, conservative and archaic PS obstructing economic prosperity in Wallonia. Marc De Vos (a member of the liberal think tank Nova Civitas) for instance, talks of “a PS state with legions of civil servants and unemployed” in a column published in *De Standaard* (31st August, 2005). De Vos presents the PS as the “*Parti Schizophrène*” that despite its rhetoric of ‘Nouveau PS’ wants new subsidies and more taxes for Belgium and Wallonia.

An outline of the situation is another argumentative strategy for the Vlaams Belang to legitimize its solution, i.e., regionalisation of economic policy:

*Wallonia remains the poor student in the EU class and in the short term even risks being overtaken by different regions of the former Eastern Bloc. It is nowhere near to catching up with Flanders. (Focus Text, 1)*

The party further justifies its demand for regionalisation by stressing that it would also be to the advantage of Wallonia, as can be observed in the following rhetorical questions from the Draft Manifesto:

*In fact this entire reality of two economies kept together is only possible because of those transfers (the interregional money streams, HC). Is it not necessary that political Flanders questions this cohabitation in all tranquillity, also for the benefit of Walloon self-sufficiency? And in particular for the benefit of economic development in Flanders as well as in Wallonia? (Draft Manifesto, 7)*

The questions suggest that the Vlaams Belang is also in favour of a regionalisation 'for Wallonia's own good'. However, one of the implications of this apparent empathy is, as van Dijk (1993) evokes, not only to blame the victim (in this case Wallonia), but also to punish the region for being victim in the first place. The rhetoric defending the regionalisation also says something as: "We have done everything for you we could, now it's your turn." In its Focus Text, the Vlaams Belang accordingly states that Wallonia should "*rely on its own strengths and advantages*", referring to a number of concrete benefits, such as "*Liège that with Bierset has an international airport and an important European inner harbour*" (Focus Text, 2).

In conclusion, it is clear that the Vlaams Belang presents both regions differently and uses this difference to 'prove' the necessity of its solutions (i.e., regionalisation of economic policies). Following a 'we are good, but they are bad comparison', Flanders is portrayed in a positive way, whereas Wallonia is associated with negative characteristics. The negative, stereotypical presentation of Wallonia can nonetheless also be found among other Flemish parties and social actors. In Flanders, Wallonia corresponds to a handful of pejorative terms such as impoverishment, political favouritism, an ailing economy, and high unemployment. We thus recognise in the political discourse in Flanders the central component in many political communication, namely the distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Wodak 2002). In this case, 'us' is the Flemish region which is painted in a positive way and set in opposition to 'them', the Walloon region, which is debased. This distinction then allows readers to identify themselves with Flanders and for negative characterization of Wallonia.

The following example of a description of both regions in the Draft Manifesto is illustrative:

*The Flemish economy is a modern, open economy with a solid international reputation regarding productivity, technical knowledge and willingness to work. SMEs and the self-employed are the driving force behind its prosperity. [...] With its traditional industry Wallonia has, however, clung to state subsidies. An incomparably large part of the population is reliant on state benefits. Only 22% of the Walloons actively contributes to government income with a tax on their private income. (Draft Manifesto, 6–7)*

With the above quote, the party also paints the Flemish economy as ‘Flemish cultural heritage’ built on a foundation of small-scale enterprises which are “*the backbone of the Flemish economy*” (*Manifesto*, 77). This quote also illustrates that particularly the entrepreneurs in these small companies are targeted in the Vlaams Belang’s economic discourse. We return to this issue below.

#### 5.4 A performing government

New extreme right-wing parties in general, and the Vlaams Belang in particular, attempt to mobilise people by standing up for them while campaigning against the political system and the establishment (Taggart 2000). This is in line with the party’s aspiration to reduce the governing body’s size and restrict the government’s role.

*Those things that can be realized more efficiently at a lower level, must not be left in the hands of a nameless authority far from the people. The government and the political authorities should therefore in principle act modestly and with reticence. (Draft Manifesto, 5)*

The principle of a smaller government that the Vlaams Belang advocates corresponds to the discourse of other parties. The VLD, for instance, explains that “*it should always be considered whether government initiative or regulation does not cost society more than market failure. [...] The government should permanently examine how it can increase citizens’ freedom of spending with a rejection of tasks or by outsourcing them. [...] The government’s sphere of activity should clearly be delimited and restricted, resulting in a slim state.*” (Congress Text May 2005: 8). In his Civil Manifestos, Verhofstadt went one step further. His first manifesto (Verhofstadt 1991) even contained a complete paragraph dedicated to the right of abandoning the state. Citizens should “*be given the possibility to secure vital issues such as their children’s education, their old age or their health without any intervention from the state and politics.*” (57).

The Vlaams Belang proposes a ‘performing’ government rather than a government ‘in control’, and speaks in favour of ‘more with less’. It is nonetheless remarkable that in its economic discourse, the party advocates a government that is more in the background and less in control, whereas concerning themes such as criminality and asylum, it demands stricter government oversight.

*The government – unfortunately – targets control more than profitability. The common interest would benefit more from a performing government, attaining concrete and significant policy objectives, and less from a government in control, that wishes to be present everywhere in society. (Focus Text, 16)*

Similarly, CD&V states that “*the government should especially be a better regulator and much less of an actor.*” (Presentation Socio-Economic Alternative,

October 2005). Among liberals as well, the ‘more with less’ argument can be observed: “*The government should make sure that the income it generates shall also be used efficiently so that it can offer qualitative services.*” (Congress Text May 2005: 3)

The Vlaams Belang campaigns for a socially-corrected free economy, speaks in favour of less government intervention and aspires to an economy with a regulatory government instead of an economy controlled by it. In contrast to Keynesianism claiming government intervention to stimulate economic consumption, the party also focuses on a supply-side economic model that relies on promoting production.

*According to Say's law – ‘every offer creates its own demand’ – consumption follows production. The government has to invest and to reward work and investment risks instead of punishing them. The central belief of the micro-economic model is that unique chances on the market (like low taxes or technological innovations) may lead to a faster growth rate of the economy. (Manifesto, 24)*

In general, it can be said that the party's advocacy of a more restricted governing body, that focuses on production rather than consumption, is clearly rooted in liberal principles. Yet, it differs from the doctrine of laissez-faire, neo-liberalism of Thatcher in the UK or Reagan in the USA (Heywood 2003). Indeed, in combination with its principles in favour of a free market and a restricted government body, the party presents some protectionist measures and sees limitations of the market principle in some areas.

*The nuclear responsibilities of the government, like public services, may not be privatized. Cooperation with the private sector may, however, optimize these tasks. (Manifesto, 31)*

The need for an efficient government is also put forward in the party's rhetoric on globalisation. The rhetoric of delocalisation and globalisation is indeed an argumentative vehicle for presenting the aim of constructing an efficient government. Global competitiveness is the key, and in order to be competitive, the state has to use the public funds in an efficient way.

*Economies in a free market are only serviceable to the common interest when government supports them in an appropriate and efficient way. If not, they will delocalise. Hence, it is important that the public resources which are used by the government will pay.*

The above paragraph includes a clear prediction: if the government won't conduct an efficient policy, they (i.e., the economies) will delocalise. Hence, the Vlaams Belang constructs a topos of fear and a warning story: bad things will happen when the options for an efficient policy are not implemented. In his study of policy documents, Fairclough (2003) found similar slippages between description and prediction: claims about what is the case alternate with predictions about what will happen. The legitimization here applies to policies, to what we must do, and these

policies are legitimated by the claims about globalisation and delocalisation. It is also worth noting that the principal agents in the economies, the entrepreneurs and companies, are not mentioned. Only the economies, which are assumed to be free market and global, in general are represented. Hence, globalisation is represented as a process without social agents – as something which is just happening rather than something that companies are doing (see also Fairclough 2000 for New Labour).

The Vlaams Belang's liberal way of thinking in favour of a more restricted and more efficient governing body can also be observed in the party's demand for more business-like ways of making the government work. It is otherwise remarkable how the party itself – speaking of a *business world unfortunately infested with English terms* (Focus Text, 18)<sup>2</sup> – uses an English term (New Public Management) in this context.

*A modern relationship between the business world and the government is one of the most important challenges of this century. The New Public Management possesses characteristics from business economics. Reflection on how administrations can perform 'government' differently is a commendable initiative. (Focus Text, 16)*

Similarly, traditional parties speak in favour of the introduction of modern management techniques in public administrations. Part of the Copernicus reform of federal public services, for instance, elaborated by former Minister of Civil Service Affairs Luc Van den Bossche (SPA), implied the introduction of principles pertaining to modern human resources management. The Flemish government's BBB (Dutch abbreviation for Better Government Policy – Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid) represented the release of a 'new' organisation of government according to modern organisational principles. At the end of 2005, a Task Force Corporate Governance was established and charged with examining principles of 'Good Governance' or 'Corporate Governance' – a hot item in the private sector during the past few years – could be integrated into the new structure of Flemish public services.

The Vlaams Belang's negative view of the public sector stands in sharp contrast to its positive attitudes towards the entrepreneurial world. This is evident from the following rhetorical question:

*Is not the realization that a failing economy is probably due in the first place to wrongly chosen government meddling, and not to entrepreneurs or employers, becoming increasingly widespread? (Draft Manifesto, 6)*

Entirely in line with the Vlaams Belang's populist discourse, companies are also attributed the positive characteristic of listening to the population's wishes, whereas the government fails to do so. This evaluative statement can be observed in the following paragraph:

*These days, citizens stand up for themselves more than they used to, and they wish to be known not only in their needs, but also in their preferences. Companies take*



*this into account, the government continues doing this insufficiently. It is still too patronizing to the population, but also to the business world. (Draft Manifesto, 15).*

The Civil Democracy envisaged by Verhofstadt in its Civil Manifestos (1991 and 1992), too, specifies that politicians ought to base their decisions on existing attitudes among business managers and marketing people, such as sensitivity to what consumers want and making themselves known to consumers by means of publicity (Blommaert 2001). Politics should therefore take on practical models that are successful in management and marketing: a bond with consumers, name familiarity, openness ... In its May 2005 Congress text, the VLD states that “*public services should target their clients more and become more efficient*” (8).

### 5.5 An enterprise-friendly Flanders

The Vlaams Belang's faith in reduced state control is in keeping with its zeal to create an enterprise-friendly climate. According to the party, government intervention obstructs such a climate. To create an enterprise-friendly climate, lowering high fiscal pressure is an important recipe according to the Vlaams Belang. A practical example containing a business manager's point of view is to clarify the party's discourse in favour of lower tax pressure.

*If BASF Antwerp were to relocate to Germany, overall wage costs would be a good 20% or 65 million euros lower on a yearly basis. Dejaegher (BASF Antwerp's CEO): In cooperation with the social partners and the government we urgently need to start a search for alternatives to this severe handicap that not only obstructs all investments, but also destroys jobs, especially for older workers.” BASF's CEO emphasizes a decrease in fiscal pressure with regard to labour and flexible payment, stating, for instance, that the settled tax reduction on shift work bonus schemes will barely cause a decrease – from 30% to 29% – in the competitive disadvantage with Germany. (Focus Text, 14)*

Once again different experts and figures are mentioned as an argumentative strategy and once again reference to people or studies outside the party constitutes a powerful technique of proving party statements. Referring to persons in whom some kind of institutional authority is nested, has indeed been presented as an important strategy of legitimation by scholars on discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003). Moreover, quoting Flemish entrepreneurs proves the Vlaams Belang uses a discourse that is also to be found among entrepreneurs.

*At the Bekaert general meeting (11th May 2005), Baron Paul Buysse – a person difficult to suspect of nationalist or even regionalist sympathies – strongly advocated an enterprise-friendly climate. [...] ‘To our surprise, we observe that the government continues its efforts to discourage, if not chase industrial enterprises, job providers par excellence, out of the country.’ (Focus Text, 6)*



According to the Vlaams Belang, high fiscal pressure is also the reason for the lack of foreign investment, as is clearly shown in the quote below containing the problem of stagnation of foreign investment and its causes.

*Still, we are not surprised that under current excessive federal fiscal pressure and with the jungle of rules and regulations at different government levels, foreign investment has barely increased in the past few years. (Draft Manifesto, 20)*

The reader is invited to share this diagnosis, perhaps inducing her/him to agree with the explicit solution contained in the text, particularly the reduction of federal fiscal pressure and of the large amount of rules. With this solution the party returns to its most important economic recipes, i.e., the reduction of fiscal pressure and the simplification of administration. These are also the key items of the VLD's economic rhetoric. In its May 2005 Congress text, for example, the party talks of "a ponderous Belgian administration" and advocates "simplification in favour of entrepreneurs and radical simplification of existing laws and regulations". Apart from that, the party also wishes to reduce general fiscal pressure and wage costs.

Still, even though the Vlaams Belang refers to a lack of foreign investments, the party is at the same time alarmed over the 'internationalisation' of the Flemish economy and speaks in favour of keeping as much strategic sectors as possible in Flemish control. The following example is illustrative and is also an example of what Fairclough (2003, 167) calls 'futurology': injunctions about what must be done are legitimized in terms of predictions about the future. In this case, the futurological prediction is that more SME's will be sold to foreign companies if the government does not invest more in research and development.

*It is alarming that an ever-increasing number of SMEs is sold to foreign companies. The best way to keep our Flemish companies in Flemish hands is via investments in research and development. (Manifesto, 39)*

This corresponds with Muddé's (1999) conclusion that for the Flemish extreme right-wing party, the Flemish entrepreneurs should be protected against foreign investors. It is also in line with the party's ethno-linguistic and Flemish-nationalist rhetoric. The party also claims that strategic sectors like gas and electricity should remain as much as possible under Flemish control. Yet, the party – in line with its liberal slogans – states that this anchoring should be organised by the entrepreneurs themselves.

In order to create an enterprise-friendly Flanders, the Vlaams Belang calls for the weakening of unions. It accuses the unions of not managing workers' interests – blaming them, as they blamed the government, for not paying attention to people's wishes and desires. This is phrased as follows in a rhetorical question:

*Do not the unions thus become defenders of replacement income rather than managers of working people's interests? (Draft Manifesto, 18)*

In line with this general negative view of the unions, the party is opposed to institutionalised union structures in SMEs.

*Union organisations, for example, continue their attempts to access SMEs employing less than 50 people. [...] In smaller enterprises it ought to be possible in the first place for informal consultation formulas to play their part to the fullest. (Focus Text, 16)*

This follows the discourse used by Unizo, the Flemish association of self-employed business owners (Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemingen). The association resolutely refused to accept the bill submitted to the Chamber of Representatives by the Flemish and French-speaking socialists aimed at the compulsory creation of a Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (Comité voor Preventie en Bescherming op het Werk) for SMEs employing 20 to 50 people. A similar union committee is now compulsory for a minimum of 50 workers. Karel Van Eetvelt, Unizo CEO, accordingly stated during an interview with the Flemish newspaper *De Morgen* (28th November, 2005) that a number of the *Vlaams Belang*'s economic programme points had been copied from Unizo's programme. At any rate, this proves that the *Vlaams Belang* wishes to appeal to (small) enterprises. Indeed, the party's Economic Manifesto contains an SME plan presenting 14 measures specifically targeting such small scale businesses. "*This shall give self-employed business owners, shop owners, small and medium enterprises every chance to secure future prosperity.*" (Manifesto, 35). The plan suggests, for example, grouping all SME-related powers under one Flemish minister, relieving their administrative burden, and introducing fiscal incentives for investments in security. The plan also includes the party's opposition to an institutionalised union structure for SME's.

This attention to small businesses may also be found in the programmes of other extreme right parties like the FPÖ and the SVP (Mudde, 2007). The party's explicit attention to SMEs corresponds to the populist rhetoric it uses to represent the voice of the people or the man on the street. In this particular case, the party stands up for (small) entrepreneurs. Appealing to the small business owner is in keeping with Kitschelt's (1995) definition of the 'Winning Formula' in that successful extreme right-wing parties are attempting to charm small business owners with neo-liberal policies.

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

In the literature on the group of extreme right parties, there is an ongoing debate about these parties' views on the economy. While Kitschelt's (1995) conceptual and theoretical model of the extreme right includes neo-liberalism as a feature of

the extreme right, others (a.o. Mudde 1999 and forthcoming; Rydgren 2002) have argued that these parties are rather nationalist and protectionist when it comes to economy. In this article, we have shed new light on this debate by a systematic analysis of the discourse that the Vlaams Belang (one of the most successful extreme right parties in Europe) employed during its Economic Congress, organised in November 2005. Applying a qualitative discourse analysis, we demonstrate that the primary focus of the party lies on the principle of a Flemish economic policy. As such, the party continues its discourse of Flemish independence, thereby attacking the Walloon (and particularly socialist) policy makers who are presented as the main culprits for the Walloon economic malaise. The texts published on the occasion of the Economic Congress also call for less state interference, lower taxes and deregulation. Hence, they clearly possess liberal characteristics. Consequently, the Vlaams Belang's discourse is in keeping with Kitschelt's (1995) definition of the Winning Formula, though we prefer to speak of a liberal programme instead of a neo-liberal one. Neo-liberalism indeed amounts to a form of market fundamentalism (Heywood 2003), whereas the Vlaams Belang's programme includes some protectionist measures and state dirigisme. Overall, it seems that with its liberal slogans, the party – in accordance with Kitschelt's (1995) ideas – focuses on an appeal to the group of entrepreneurs, whereas the party's ethnocentric and authoritarian ideas aim at the working classes. Interestingly, moreover, these latter groups are completely overlooked in the economic texts. The organisation of an Economic Congress by the Vlaams Belang thus can be interpreted as an effort to extend its group of voters with people representing entrepreneurial initiative: traditional liberal voters. The inclusion of economic issues in the party programme is instrumentalised to attack competitors and attract voters (Mudde 2007). At any rate, the economic issue remains a secondary feature for the party. Hence, we cannot agree with the central position the economic discourse occupies in Kitschelt's (1995) explanation of the success of extreme right-wing parties. Congress President Gerolf Annemans phrased this using the following metaphor during his speech at the Congress: "*The body, the interior and the engine of the Flemish-national party remain the same; we are equipping it today with an economic GPS system.*"

Besides our aim to add a new perspective to the ongoing debate regarding the economic viewpoints of successful extreme right parties, the paper also sought to bring discourse analysis to the study of extreme right parties. Discourse studies have thus far been of secondary interest to extreme right scholars. However, as a growing body of scholarship locates the success or failure of extreme right parties by the parties themselves or the supply-side of extreme right voting (Norris 2005), future research should focus more on the parties' discourse as an explanatory variable in their success. Since this discourse is employed in a strategic interaction with

other parties, studying the discourse in its context through the application of discourse analysis has demonstrated to be a useful methodology. Our case study has indeed shown how the Vlaams Belang – after having attracted socialist voters in the beginning of the nineties – is currently looking for (small) entrepreneurs and businessmen. These have traditionally voted for the liberal parties, were under-represented within the Vlaams Belang's electorate until the end of the nineties (Depickere & Swyngedouw 2002) and currently seem dissatisfied with Verhofstadt's 'leftist' economic policy. The party therefore occupies the discourse space that has been developed by other parties. Bauböck (2002) came to a similar conclusion for the FPÖ's nation-building discourse in which the party benefited from the legitimacy its political opponents had provided for its major programmatic planks. The Vlaams Belang's economic rhetoric specifically resembles the language used by Verhofstadt in his Civil Manifestos, and revolves around less government, a more efficient and market-oriented administration and more Flanders. Just like Verhofstadt in the past, from the benches of the opposition the Vlaams Belang can develop a radical strategy that does not need to compromise or elaborate on policy options that will actually be pursued. The Civil Manifestos' inheritance as well as the 'move towards the left', regretted by several liberal representatives and members, too, are part of an explanation for the Vlaams Belang's strategy. The party appears to be searching for certain programmatic points with the hope of seducing (disappointed) supporters of the liberal party. In the beginning of the nineties, the party made a similar move towards the socialist voters. On the occasion of the Socio-Economic Congress organised by the party on 5th December, 1993, Gerolf Annemans stated: *"In that matter, we shall deliver a fatal thrust to the socialists. After their voters, we shall also take over their themes."* (van den Brink 2005). Future research could test the hypothesis that with a strategic choice in their rhetoric, extreme right parties might attract a new type of electorate. Doing so might lead us to better understand the mechanism through which radical right parties succeed in extending their electorate while not losing their original electorate. Hence, more research is also needed to investigate how extreme right parties, and the Vlaams Belang in particular, integrate the different issues they handle in a (coherent) discourse which is attractive for different types of electorate.

## Notes

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1. All quotes have been translated into English by the author.
2. In its Economic Manifest (74–75) the party elaborates this point of view, pointing out linguistic alienation at the top of several companies, and advocates maintaining the so-called September Decree from 1973. One of this decree's stipulations is that for written social relations between employers and employees the sole use of Dutch is allowed in the Dutch linguistic area.

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### *Author's address*

Hilde Coffé  
 Department of Sociology/ICS  
 Utrecht University  
 Heidelberglaan 2, Van Unnik, Room 14.18C  
 3584 CS Utrecht  
 Netherlands  
 h.r.coffe@uu.nl

*About the author*

The author is assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Utrecht. She conducts research on political sociology, social capital and political parties. She has published a book on the extreme right parties in Belgium and some of her work has been published in *Sociology Social Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* and *Acta Politica*.

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